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ABSTRACT

As the development of an individual's identity may be linked to the opportunity to write or to construct knowledge through participation in social dialogue, women historically have lacked self awareness. The 17th century British writer Elizabeth Cary illustrates the rhetorical difficulties that women face in appropriating dominant discourses to confront constructions of female identity and restrictions on their speech. "The Tragedie of Miriam" and "History of the Life, Reign, and Death of Edward II" reveal their author's conflicted personality. Cary is torn between her need to acknowledge Catholic cosmology (a fundamental order conceived of and promulgated by men) and her own attempt to recognize the constructedness of this order. She is further torn between the domestic identity that her culture has assigned to her and the identity she has constructed for herself, that of author and recusant; her socially mandated role as silent and obedient wife represses her need to write and profess her faith. Such dualities take the following manifestations in her texts: (1) her texts externalize a repressed sense of self; (2) she can use only covert rhetorical strategies to confront the powerful social authorities pitted against her; (3) her metadiscourse reveals her subservient female voice. Her texts finally remain ambivalent about the ability of women to respond to the social constructions of women; and they demonstrate a lack of confidence in the authority of female speech and knowledge. (TB)

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ED 371 354

ELIZABETH CARY AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY

Yvonne Merrill

At this year's MLA conference, Scott Zaluda talked about community building in the early black universities. He stated that the awakening of verbal self awareness in African Americans came through writing about the commonplaces of their worlds. In articulating their experiences, they were able to create a sense of self, or identity. I believe that women, too, have historically lacked self awareness through their inability to articulate their realities. Without the ability to construct knowledge through participation in social dialogue, women have had little opportunity to create meaning from their experience and to understand themselves and their condition. Only the few women who have succeeded in appropriating dominant discourse have been able to achieve a sense of individual self with which to confront the constructions and silencing of women in the dominant discourses of their societies.

Seventeenth-century writer Elizabeth Cary illustrates the rhetorical difficulties women faced. Cary's texts reveal a conflicted personality covertly resisting the silencing of women. But because of that silencing, she is unable to make a consistent or effective response to the authorities who silence her. I will try to support this thesis after briefly summarizing Cary's rhetorical situation by discussing her difficulties creating her subjectivity and the way her metadiscourse reveals women's sense of powerlessness in social discourse.

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Western societies have actively stifled women's voices and controlled their ability to create rhetorical subjectivities during periods in which a rising bourgeoisie has destabilized traditional social hierarchies. In seventeenth-century England, for example, the dominant discourses defined the ideal woman as chaste, *silent*, and obedient. The socio-economic agenda this helped forward was the consolidation of family wealth. The middle class was competing with the aristocracy through commerce and the accumulation of capital. Both classes wanted to protect their positions. In order to perpetuate class power, they domesticated women to guarantee legitimate inheritance and create a trade in women that solidified the economic relationships among men (Kelly-Gadol, 1976, 1977; Casey, 1976). Chastity and obedience obviously contributed to these male goals, but silence was even more effective as a tool for achieving men's social objectives. If women could not speak of men's affairs, they could not contest them. In order to silence women's voices, therefore, masculine society denied them the right to speak.

I feel the inability to contest social structures may arise out of an inability to *conceptualize* resistance because conceptualization relies on social conversation. Lev Vygotsky and Mikhail Baktin have shown us how subjectivities are created through social conversation (Vygotsky, 1978; Bahktin, 1990). Without a symbolic dialogic between the individual and the world, self reflexivity and understanding of the social world cannot develop. The individual remains largely undifferentiated from the social environment (Shotter and Gergen, 1992). Thought is actually internalized conversation. Thus women who are not allowed the necessary social dialogic to form identities cannot conceptualize a resistance to that social

environment. Feminist historian Gerda Lerner maintains that for most of Western history women have been kept in "trained ignorance" (Lerner 10).

Seventeenth-century women had no socially sanctioned role that allowed them to construct their individual subjectivities through social dialogic. They consequently had no means of understanding themselves and their condition in the world. Women were admonished to be silent by every social authority: the monarchy, the church, the press, the educational establishment, and the family, which was the fundamental socio-economic unit. Their vocation in the Church had been eliminated by the Anglican state, and they were even debarred from such traditionally female occupations as midwifery. If educated at all, it was only in the social graces, and if they were taught to read, they were often forbidden to write. They were denied the canon of the Western tradition, and none published under her own name. Contemporary psychologists now theorize that individual identity has, in fact, been exclusively a masculine, bourgeois phenomenon in Western history (Shotter and Gergen, 1992). Patriarchal institutions during Cary's time protected that prerogative with particularly virulent misogynistic discourses, whose necessary objective was silencing women.

Rhetorician Thomas Wilson had revealed a generation earlier that men knew exactly what they were about in governing who could speak when he said ". . . none can knowe either what thei are, or what thei have, without the gift of utterance" (Wilson 616). And Cary's contemporary, Francis Bacon stated, "For men believe that their reason governs words; but it is also true that words react on the understanding: . . ." (Bacon 632). Conduct books for women, therefore, specifically forbade them speech that would affect masculine reality making.

One such text, The English Gentlewoman, Drawn Out to the Full Body, has the following instruction for women:

> "Touching the subject of your discourse, when oportunity shall exact it of you, and without touch of immodesty expect it from you, make choyce of such arguments as may best improue your knowledge in household affaires, and other priuate employments. To discourse of State-matters, will not become your auditory: nor to dispute of high poynts of Diuinity, will it sort well with *women* of your quality." (Bruyn 21-22)

If women could not acquire and use the language of social interaction, they could neither construct personal subjectivity nor affect social reality.

In his discussion of expressive writing, James Kinneavy has shown us that Being-for-Itself must be conjoined with Being-for-Others and Being-in-the-World for self expression (Kinneavy, 1971). Elizabeth Cary's female contemporaries had no means of acquiring Being-for-Others and Being-in-the World if excluded from interacting *with* others and the world through speaking and writing. Without a clear sense of who they were, they had little means by which to frame resistance and redefine the category of *woman*. In controlling women's reflective thought by restricting their speech, male authorities could pursue their social agendas uninhibited.

But Cary *did* speak--by virtue of a Herculean effort to educate herself. She taught herself Latin, Hebrew, French, Italian, and Spanish, and immersed herself in theological study against tremendous disapproval, not only from social authority, but from her own family as well (Beilin 160). As a child, she had to bribe her family's servants to buy her the necessary candles to read surreptitiously at night (Fischer 225). After she was married, her mother-in-law took away her books. Drawn to patristic writings and saints' lives, she realized her personal identity as a Catholic recusant. But in the face of social authorities who had forbidden her to speak and who did not listen, it was impossible for her to form a unified personal identity. Her

subjectivity remained conflicted because as a recusant, she was subject to public prosecution, and as a woman writer, she defied social injunctions to silence. Thus, she had no audience or social interlocutor with whom to construct her meanings.

Illustrating how effectively women were silenced is the fact that only twelve original works were published by women in the first third of the century. Only five were literature, and one was a saints' lives. All the remaining were in marginalized genres such as prophecy, translation, and mothers' advice books (Crawford 269). Two of Cary's works were published. But her closet drama The Tragedie of Mariam was supposedly printed without her permission--a typical female ploy to circumvent the masculine monopoly on publication. Her translation of Cardinal du Perron's response to James I was confiscated and burned as a heretical text. Her own saints' lives were lost, and her History of the Life, Reign, and Death of Edward II was never published. Her opportunities to realize a fully formed rhetorical subjectivity were, thus, attenuated.

During the course of writing her small body of work, Cary's personal identity is realized in a schizophrenic subjectivity that is never thoroughly resolved. In The Man Question: Vision of Subjectivity in Feminist Theory, Kathy Ferguson has derived a typology of feminisms based on women's ways of locating themselves in order to speak. Her categories are "*praxis* feminism," in which the subject situates herself in terms of her social relations, "cosmic feminism," in which the subject situates herself in relation to a larger spiritual and natural order, and "linguistic feminism," in which the female subject constructs herself by negating and affirming the discourses she engages. According to Ferguson, however, the first two and the third are mutually exclusive. *Praxis* and cosmic feminisms assume an underlying order

in the universe, but linguistic feminism deconstructs such assumptions by focusing on language as the principal medium in which social reality is constructed. What I would argue is that, historically, many women writers actually use all three, which in a sense *does* create an internal tension. I feel that they have had to acknowledge a fundamental order in the universe. But unlike men, who are no longer conscious of the constructedness of the world they take for granted, have recognized that that order is *man-made*, rather than natural. Like other marginalized groups, women sense clearly what marginalizes them.

Cary situates her rhetorical subject within the Catholic cosmology and within the relationships of power and authority in society, but she challenges their naturalness. She gives only a conservative response, however, to the personal and legal repression of women and displays what Margaret Ferguson calls an anxious attempt to justify her voice (Margaret Ferguson, 1988). Her subversions of dominant discourse are never unequivocal. Maureen Quilligan notes, for instance, a disturbing Toryism among the women writers of Cary's century (Quilligan, 1991). Throughout The Tragedie of Mariam, the chorus provides the voice of communal sense by affirming women's necessary submission to male authority at both the domestic and the civic levels. Mariam herself acknowledges that her challenge to that authority was what has doomed her: "Had not my selfe against my selfe conspirde,/No plot: no adversarie from without/Could Herods love from Mariam have retirde" (IV. viii. 1807-9).

Having unlocked the door to masculine reality with the key made of Latin, Cary was confronted by a mirror that showed her herself from a masculine perspective, which she initially absorbed. But the image was so distorted, and conformed so little to her Being-for-Itself, she came to

criticize the mirror makers who, unfortunately, couldn't hear her. Her closet drama Mariam could never be publicly performed. Her play is unplayable by virtue of its overlong speeches, its complex sentences, and its lack of physical action. Cary also claims no responsibility for it once it's printed. She speaks, yet simultaneously muffles her voice.

Torn between the domestic identity constructed for her and her identity as author and recusant, Cary suffers a personal schism that is reflected in her work (Fischer, 1985; Beilin, 1987). First, her texts externalize a repressed sense of self. Second, she can use only covert rhetorical strategies to confront the powerful social authorities pitted against her. And third, her metadiscourse reveals her subservient female voice.

Cary's attempt to be the socially mandated silent and obedient wife represses her need to write and profess her faith, creating for her a dual identity that she cannot reconcile. Persecuted and subjected herself, Cary builds sympathy for Mariam who speaks out against oppression by showing Herod's arbitrary exercise of his patriarchal power, both as husband and as monarch. His sadistic order for Mariam's death, his completely irrational assumption of her faithlessness, and his paranoid execution of her argue against a social order that subjugates and reifies women. Yet Mariam dies, seemingly confirming the status quo. Salome, on the other hand, is depicted unsympathically as a social outlaw, yet her outlaw status apparently enables her to voice defiance of masculine authority and exert personal agency, for instance, in ridding herself of unwanted husbands. These subversions reveal Cary's conflicted sense of female identity. Mariam and Salome may represent the dual halves of their creator's subjectivity.

By translating Cardinal du Perron's letter, Cary herself became a social outlaw, and like Mariam, doomed herself. The letter was destroyed by monarchical authority, making concrete its translator's inability to realize a unified social identity through social discourse. In sentencing her work to oblivion, Cary situates herself within the relationships of subjection and obedience she has to the figures of authority in her life. She attempts to create her rhetorical space where patriarchy in the family converges with dynastic politics, precisely where Being-in-Itself must acquire Being-for-Others and Being-in-the-World. But her attempts to remake social reality cannot fully succeed because she has no unified identity and few hear her voice.

Cary's History of the Life, Reign, and death of Edward II is a masterful uniting of overt compliance with authority and covert criticism. But it remained buried in her husband's papers. In it, Cary uses the story of a remote king to make several pointed criticisms of her own monarch, Charles I. For example, she warns him against court sycophants, and she blames not the sycophants, but the king who condones them: "The Errour is not so properly theirs, as their Masters, who do countenance and advance such Sycophants" (Cary 1627, 9). In couching her criticism of Charles I in the story of Edward II, she avoids a direct confrontation with her king that would have been treasonous.

Though Edward's queen Isabel has committed adultery and treason, Cary portrays her sympathetically as "a jewel not being rightly valued" (Cary 1808, 70). Edward appears to deserve his fate at Isabel's hands because he has abandoned her, disgraced the monarchy, and squandered his birthright on ill-conceived wars and homosexual favorites. Cary attempts to justify Isabel's behavior by employing a situational ethics resembling that used by

women described in Carol Gilligan's study of women's ethical development (Gilligan, 1982). Isabel seems to owe more loyalty to her lover Mortimer than to her husband/king. Yet Cary overtly upholds monarchy and takes a moral stance as tutor to her monarch, thus acknowledging the social hierarchy while covertly critiquing it. At one point, Cary criticizes her heroine for taking a dishonourable revenge by not giving Edward "a fair and legal trial, by his Peers" (Cary 1808, 89). But Isabel is the one to survive and restore the throne to her son.

Cary reveals her lack of faith, however, in women's rhetorical power when Isabel makes an eloquent plea for her brother's assistance. It is not her words that move him: "Her tears, like orient pearls, bedew her lovely cheeks, while she with a silent rhetorick invites a noble pity" (Cary 1808, 83). Women, being constructed as incapable of logical discourse, must resort to a silent display of emotion to persuade.

The metadiscourse of Cary's female characters also reveals their sense of powerlessness in the role of public speaker. Mariam's first speech claims she has spoken her mind frequently, censuring "*Romes* last *Hero* for deceit" (I.i.3-4). But then, when she comments on her act, she says that, in doing so, she usually spoke too rashly and had to recant. She then generalizes this fault to all women: "Mistaking is with vs, but too too common" (I.i.7-10). These lines seem to anticipate the communal sense that women should not speak because they are often wrong.

Mariam's metadiscourse, in fact, reveals that antagonistic social authority has the power to invalidate her own knowledge and experience. Mariam glosses her earlier verbal anguish over Herod's supposed death as the words of a hypocrite when she attempts to explain her sudden sorrow on learning that he actually lives (III.iii.1155-9). Though Mariam is confident

that her physical chastity will save her, it doesn't because of the linguistic construction linking chastity to silence and obedience (IV.vii.1705; viii.1835-6).

The illocution markers of Cary's other female characters also show them to be ineffectual. Though Herod's former wife Doris has "begd" and "prayed" for vengeance against Mariam for nine years she has not had satisfaction, and her curses have had no effect (II.iii). Only Salome can "defie" her husband Constabarus and discard him. But she is an outlaw, and the virtuous Mariam calls her "base" (I.iii).

Cary's own texts reveal a similar lack of authority. Though she uses the sophisticated cohesion and coherence devices of her canonical models, she often undermines their effectiveness with intrusive and preachy statements of intent, explicitly announcing these interruptions: "Though it awile delay the concluding part of the history, yet my pen must not leave [instructions for kingly passions] untouched" (1808, 91). Most noticeable are her attitude markers, which appear to be an attempt to establish an authoritative stance. For example, she reverses the traditional sympathy for Edward II by calling him tyrannical, rather than pitiable (1808, 69). She labels court sycophants "imperious," rather than pusillanimous and accuses the king of "domestick piracy" (1808, 77). Her attitude markers are also glosses on her text.

In sum, therefore, Cary's conflicted subjectivity reveals itself in antipathetical propositions and characters, which she does not reconcile. Instead her texts remain ambivalent about women's ability to respond to the social constructions of women. And her metadiscourse shows her lack of confidence in the authority of female speech and knowledge. Without the right to participate in social discourse, Cary cannot realize a unified personal identity. Her work exemplifies her dichotomous perceptions of

women's nature and roles. Unable to conceptualize a female identity clearly distinguished from that purveyed by the dominant discourse, she creates conflicting images of women and their roles.

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